

VZCZCXRO3174
PP RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHSL
RUEHSR
DE RUEHAH #0151/01 0321553
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 011553Z FEB 10
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4161
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 6196
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3877
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3736
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4440
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 ASHGABAT 000151

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2020

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: THE TRANSLUCENT STATE OF TURKMENISTAN

REF: A. ASHGABAT 14

[B](#). 09 ASHGABAT 1633

[C](#). ASHGABAT 117

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: Turkmenistan is often described as opaque, with a government with an inscrutable decisionmaking process.

While still very insular, with few external points of reference, it is not opaque. The system has rules, although this fact is not readily apparent to those with only a passing knowledge of the Turkmen. Understanding these rules, however, makes it easier for us to comprehend what is going on. It also helps us understand how to work with them to promote U.S. interests as well as understand the limitations.
END SUMMARY.

[2](#). (C) Some describe Turkmenistan as opaque; its decision making system is inscrutable and many of the policies it implements make little sense. This is not true. It is not opaque. While perhaps not rational or logical to many outsiders, the system has its own rules, which it follows, religiously. Rather than opaque, it is better to describe Turkmenistan as translucent, like a bathroom window. You can tell if the light is on or not. You know if someone is inside. You can tell when the shadows move. With time, given the light and shadow, you can deduce what is going on. Yet, there is just enough hidden to serve its purpose.

[3](#). (C) This cable is not meant as a criticism. The Turkmen are who they are. However, it will be easier for us to deal with them, if we know what that means.

NOT BACKSLIDING

[4](#). (C) Following the death of former President Saparmurat Niyazov, there was some optimism in the West that we could "turn the page" and Turkmenistan could shed its negative image and become more like other nations. Gone would be the Ruhnama (or Niyazov's book of the soul), gold statues, and bizarre pronouncements, such as renaming months after family members. There was also hope that the country would move, albeit gingerly, toward adopting political and economic reforms. When President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov came to power he did make a number of important changes. The tenth year of education was restored as well as pension payments.

The government reinstated graduate education. Restrictions on internal movement for citizens were lifted. The dual exchange rate was unified, and the currency was redenominated. The Ruhnama was de-emphasized and became a smaller part of the official curriculum. All of these were changes that most Turkmen would agree were necessary and removed some of the excesses of Niyazov's later years.

15. (C) As time has gone on, obvious changes have become more rare. Many of the political changes that have occurred have been more cosmetic rather than part of an institutionalization of reform (e.g., increasing the number of members of parliament). Some Western observers fear the Turkmen are backsliding. They aren't backsliding. They are following a model they know and with which they are comfortable. And somewhere between the euphoric optimism of 2007 and the disappointment that some observers feel today is reality.

LEADER AS STATE

16. (C) When Berdimuhamedov came to power, he removed the many photographs and some of the statues of his predecessor. Niyazov was no longer an ever present icon in the corner of the television screen. Slowly, but surely, officials swapped their Niyazov pins for Turkmen flag pins. The reference to Niyazov in the national anthem was removed and replaced by one to the Turkmen people. Western observers cheered Berdimuhamedov's dismantling of Niyazov's cult of personality.

17. (C) At the same time, during his almost three years in

ASHGABAT 00000151 002 OF 006

power, Berdimuhamedov very carefully has replaced his predecessor's cult of personality with one of his own (Ref A). The reasons for this are simple. For Turkmen, the leader is the embodiment of the state. To praise, honor, and respect him is to do the same to the country. He is like a monarch or, more appropriately, a medieval Khan. Everything revolves around him - the news, events, major decisions. If Berdimuhamedov were replaced by any other member of the elite (for who else could rule), it would be exactly the same, with only minor differences around the edges. For the time being, we should expect nothing different.

18. (C) The Khan factor is clearly observed during the many trips the President makes around the country to open various government buildings or to observe the progress of the harvest or construction. The entire government goes with him. This includes the Speaker of the Mejlis (parliament), the Cabinet of Ministers, all of the ministers (heads of ministries and agencies) under them, members of parliament, the equivalent of the joint chiefs of staff, the Council on Religious Affairs, managing editors of official newspapers, a contingent of elders, and the heads of diplomatic missions. And these are just some of the contingent that accompanies the President from Ashgabat. Add to them, the governor of the province, his cabinet-equivalent, and hordes of local leaders, performers, and townspeople. At every venue that the President visits, this same group that accompanied him from Ashgabat must stand in line to await his arrival. Then, the group follows the President on a tour of the venue. When the tour ends, the process is repeated at another venue.

19. (C) Since the leader is the embodiment of the state, personal relationships and personal diplomacy, which are valuable everywhere, are even more important for Turkmenistan. Meetings with other heads of state or government convey respect. This is something that Berdimuhamedov's Russian and Chinese counterparts understand well. And since they have strong interests regarding Central Asian energy and geopolitics, they have been frequent visitors.

110. (C) Self-preservation and control are paramount, and the

definition of success is that the President is pleased. Berdimuhamedov has to be in charge. This is a role that suits him. He has a vain and conservative personality. He has to be the Khan. This is the model of a Turkmen ruler. There is a joke making the rounds that says "if a flock of sheep is led by a tiger, they will be aggressive and confident. If a pack of tigers is led by a sheep, they will shake with fear." The leader has to be the tiger to lead the nation.

¶11. (C) A well-worn pattern, common in Central Asia, is putting relatives in positions of power or allowing them to partake of the spoils. And some relatives are in government positions and others are involved in business. This is acknowledged here and accepted, as long as there are no excesses.

....AND EVERYONE ELSE IS JUST STAFF

¶12. (C) In most countries, ministers and Deputy Chairmen of the Cabinet would be considered high-ranking, important people. That is true in Turkmenistan as well. However, in Turkmenistan, they also serve as the President's staff. When there is a formal dinner or an opening of a government building, ministers play their staff role. At formal dinners, the Minister of Culture supervises the waiters and ensures that they do their job well. At school openings, the Deputy Chairman for Education, makes sure everything is ready for the President and things are set up in the classrooms. When children and dancers perform, the Deputy Chairman for Culture will admonish the kids to stand up straight or sing louder. In Cabinet meetings, the Deputy Chairmen all dutifully take notes and stand when the President speaks to them. This staff role is why the Minister of Health was sent away for several months to supervise the building of a health

ASHGABAT 00000151 003 OF 006

spa.

¶13. (C) These government officials know their roles well and dread being found guilty of "grave shortcomings." "Grave shortcomings" rarely involve failure in policy implementation. They can, however, mean that someone has fallen down in their staff role or even that they are being punished for things handled by underlings. (It also can mean not exerting enough control over everything that falls under their area of responsibility.) One previous Deputy Minister of Education was criticized when the roof of a school collapsed. The Minister of Communications was criticized when the live feed during the opening of the pipeline to China lacked audio from one location.

MORE ON THE KHAN

¶14. (C) The President is Turkmenistan's ultimate decisionmaker. His word is final, and he makes many decisions. He decides who wins tenders and whether Turkmenistan will sign a particular foreign contract. He also, apparently, approves the schedule for physicians (Ref B). One could describe him as a micro-manager.

¶15. (C) Berdimuhamedov's orders have the force of law, but, in some cases, it is possible to push back. The best example was when the President ordered the removal of satellite dishes from the outside of apartment buildings in Ashgabat. He felt they looked like ugly mushrooms growing on the side of buildings. The Turkmen love their satellite TV and entertainment programs from Russia. The whole issue was a matter of grave concern and much conversation among city residents. As one local person said, his grandmother was worried about losing her satellite TV. While the loss of satellite TV was never in the cards, there was a question about how many channels people would have access to and how much people would have to pay. Up until that time, once someone purchased the cable box and satellite dish,

transmission was free. Many Ashgabat residents were resistant to paying anything. Several of the elite apartments on the southern side of town held resident town halls on the subject. There was quite a bit of push back and complaints to district officials (local government offices). Finally, it seemed a compromise was reached. Satellite dishes were removed from the street sides of some buildings, especially on the most traveled streets and main thoroughfares. In other areas, satellite dishes were moved to the back of buildings or not moved at all. And there has been no more discussion of it since.

¶16. (C) Often, officials implement not presidential orders, but rather enforce their own directives, with what the officials believe is in line with what the President would want. In other words, the President has not actually ordered something done, but has expressed a preference or dislike, and the officials extrapolate. This appears to have been the case with the Turkmen American Scholarship Program (TASP) students who were on the travel blacklist, because they had been enrolled or planned to enroll at the American University in Central Asia (Ref C). Berdimuhamedov did not want Turkmen students studying in Kyrgyzstan, and he criticized the Education complex for not keeping better tabs on Turkmen students studying abroad. This created the perfect situation to allow the Deputy Chairman of Education, who never liked the TASP program, to keep better tabs on those students and keep them from going to Kyrgyzstan or anywhere by putting them on the travel blacklist. As President Berdimuhamedov repeatedly said, after the USG tried to switch the students to Bulgaria, he did not care if the students studied in Bulgaria. He also did not care enough to actively intervene.

CONTROL

¶17. (C) For the Turkmenistan government, few things are more important than maintaining control. For the Turkmen leadership, this ensures that society stays orderly and limits non-Turkmen influences. This is why government

ASHGABAT 00000151 004 OF 006

officials or quasi-government officials (like the those from the Union of Entrepreneurs) need permission to attend functions or meet with foreigners. It is why every foreigner who wishes to enter Turkmenistan is vetted not by consular officers at a Turkmen embassy or consulate, but by a committee in Ashgabat that grants or denies the Letter of Invitation necessary to seek a visa to enter the country. It also explains the requirement for a diplomatic note (now filling out a form) for almost every meeting request or new proposal. Such measures allow for all the necessary offices, departments, and officials to sign off on anything before it takes place. And such approvals generally must come from the Cabinet of Ministers, if not the President himself.

¶19. (C) The insistence on maintaining control over society and the individuals within it is one reason why the leadership has little interest currently in political pluralism or democratization. They don't see the need for sweeping change. They would see moves toward real democratization as leading to instability or as they would define it, a lessening of control. Therefore, the pace of progress on any political reforms will be glacial.

FEW EXTERNAL POINTS OF REFERENCE

¶20. (C) Turkmen attitudes toward democratization and even human rights are a result of the lack of external points of reference. All cultures view their own as the locus, and some countries are more insular than others. However, in Turkmenistan, it is at the extreme of the spectrum. Turkmen officials certainly know that other countries have different interests, but almost always ascribe their own motives to others. During the efforts to get the TASP students off the travel blacklist, this point came out over and over again.

We were repeatedly asked by Turkmen officials, including those who had lived and worked abroad, "why do you even care." Explanations that freedom of travel is a human right or that the U.S. might feel a moral/political obligation to students to whom it had promised an education were met by blank stares. It was incomprehensible that anyone would want to help a bunch of young people, who were neither family members or even of their own nationality. The real reason must be something nefarious.

¶21. (C) The Turkmen leadership, for the most part, does not understand the West's emphasis on human rights. They think, "Why would you care about an arrested person who is not a relative?" While the Turkmen absolutely do not like being criticized and believe that admitting to being wrong is shameful, using "shame and blame" does not work with them. It will not get them to change. They will just feel attacked and shut down. And the Turkmen government will blame the criticizer for poisoning the relationship. Turkmen officials do not believe that intangibles, like human rights, are as important as things that you can touch and see -- like marble buildings, state of the art equipment, and visits by foreign leaders. In the view of the Turkmen leadership, those things translate into modernization, not improvements in human rights.

FORM OVER SUBSTANCE OR BEST FACE FORWARD, ALWAYS

¶22. (C) Central Asia is part of Asia. Losing face is to be avoided at all costs. Problems can often be resolved, if the resolution contains a way for the Turkmen to climb down from a position without admitting defeat or has an alternative that does not result in a loss of face. There is a fear of being looked down on or of showing that anything is less than successful. For this reason, the Turkmen often will not admit to problems (such as H1N1, HIV, poverty, drug abuse), even when they are well aware such problems exist. One case in point is from the visit of an OSCE official who was looking at the issue of domestic violence. During meetings, Turkmen officials denied there was any domestic violence in Turkmenistan. After the OSCE official, who is from Finland, started talking about the problem of domestic violence in her home country, Turkmen officials admitted it is an issue here. Once Turkmen officials have reached a level of comfort, they

ASHGABAT 00000151 005 OF 006

may be more frank, but it takes time.

¶23. (C) Along with this, the Turkmen emphasize form over substance. Things should look good on the outside. Buildings should look good and modern, and be stocked with the latest appropriate equipment (scientific, educational, medical, etc.). Furthermore, you should start with the capital, which is the place most outsiders see. It is totally irrelevant that the equipment might not work or no one may know how to operate it, or even that the building construction may be shoddy. It looks good.

¶24. (C) When Berdimuhamedov opened a model village in fall 2009, crowds of townsfolk welcomed him as he toured the new kindergarten and secondary school, hospital, mayor's office, market, and new apartment housing. Medical staff waved balloons and flags outside the hospital. Inside, they scurried around the halls and populated various offices. Berdimuhamedov toured the apartment housing and visited with a family living there in their new, well-appointed home. One of the diplomats, who had accompanied the President on this visit, stopped by the village the following day when all the officials had left. She found a ghost town. The schools, mayor's office, and most of the other buildings, including the apartment building where the family that hosted the President supposedly lived, were empty. The family was nowhere to be seen and their furniture was gone. The hospital director told the diplomat that his hospital was not really open, because he had no staff. The people, whom the diplomat had seen the day before, had come from other areas

to play the part of hospital workers.

¶25. (C) According to people who know him, President Berdimuhamedov is a big fan of technology, not because he believes in all that modern technology brings, but because high-tech, interactive, and multi-media mean modern and advanced. And Turkmen schools and hospitals possessing this type of equipment means that they are modern and have reached international standards. And so ministries are often interested in cooperation that includes training in technology, not because they always place value on it, but because they know it would please the President.

PASSIVE AGGRESSION

¶26. (C) Passive aggressive behavior is defined as "passive, sometimes obstructionist resistance to following through on expectations." It manifests itself with "procrastination, stubbornness, resentment, sullenness, or deliberate/repeated failure to accomplish requested tasks for which one is responsible." It often includes "fear of competition, fear of dependency, an inability to trust, obstructionism, sulking, and a tendency to blame others for one's own failures, rather than recognizing one's weaknesses." It is a defense mechanism, and perhaps it developed to deal with a society where one has little or no power.

¶27. (C) In any case, the default mechanism for the Turkmen bureaucracy is passive aggression. Once offended, they will shut down. One group from the Ministry of Internal Affairs traveled to CENTCOM in Tampa several years ago. They mentioned to their hosts several types of training they wanted provided by the U.S. Government, including hostage negotiation and fighting organized crime. None of the areas were those for which the U.S. military offers training. When they did not hear back on their requests, they limited their contact with U.S. officials and bitterly complained to the MFA that the U.S. was ignoring them.

¶28. (C) The "Turkmen no," the most common response by the government to requests or proposals, is a non-response. Rather than tell you no, there is silence. The lack of response is not because people fear offending by saying no; it is because if they do not want it, it is not important enough to respond. Anything that the Turkmen want, however, must be done immediately. It is not uncommon to get one-hour notice or less for meetings that were requested weeks before ("The minister can see you now!") Until recently, visiting

ASHGABAT 00000151 006 OF 006

delegations often did not know which meetings they would get or the times, until the day of the meeting. Much of this is due to the creaking and stultifying bureaucracy, which slows many things to a crawl. Nevertheless, the fact that others may be inconvenienced, simply does not register.

CONCLUSION

¶29. (C) Understanding the Turkmen and Turkmen bureaucracy makes it easier for us to grasp why things happen or fail to happen. It also helps us understand how to work with them to promote U.S. interests as well as the limitations. The key to assisting this country to change/reform is to encourage greater links with the outside world and more external points of reference. They need to be able to understand that international standards include substance as well as form.

CURRAN